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SUBJECT: FINDING PARALLELS BETWEEN BEN ALI AND CEAUSESCU

REF: TUNIS 1528

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

11. (S/NF) In a recent meeting with Ambassador, Romanian Ambassador to Tunisia Sorin-Mihail Tanasescu offered a starkly negative assessment of President Ben Ali, the GOT and Tunisia. Tanasescu suggested there are strong parallels between Tunisia today and Romania just before the fall of former President Nicolae Ceausescu. Tanasescu believes the Tunisian political and economic situation are likely to worsen significantly in the next three years. Ben Ali, he said, appeared in very bad health at a meeting October 25. Tanasescu,s assessment is the most negative we have heard from the diplomatic corps in Tunis. End Summary.

Ben Ali,s "Cult of Personality" Bodes Ill

12. (S/NF) Ambassador met with Romanian Ambassador to Tunisia Sorin-Mihail Tanasescu on November 23. Tanasescu, who arrived in Tunis in April 2007, began by underscoring his grave concern about Tunisia,s future. He said he had lived through the end of the Ceausescu regime and there are strong parallels with what is happening to today in Tunisia. Asked for specifics, Tanasescu cited the constant and increasing drumbeat of propaganda in favor of the GOT and Ben Ali. This propaganda reflects, he believes, the weakness of the regime and growing concern about inchoate, but real opposition.

13. (S/NF) Tunisia is, he said, at best stagnant and probably headed down. During the next three years, the likelihood is that political and economic situation will worsen significantly. The "cult of personality" is everywhere he said, adding "it is worse than Ceausescu,s but admittedly less than that of North Korean leader Kim Il Sung." He continued that Ben Ali,s November 7 speech was an example of high-level micromanagement at its worst.

The message: "Tunisia is perfect"

14. (S/NF) Tunisia,s biggest problem, according to Tanasescu, is that no Tunisian officials are prepared to deal with outsiders "in good faith." They will not hold open, honest and direct exchanges of information and views. This is of

particular concern in the light of the many signs of growing problems and challenges. He pointed, in particular, to the increasing price of bread and its shrinking size (see reftel). He observed there is growing discontent with rising prices generally in Tunisia, noting that an increase in the price of bread sparked riots in 1984.

¶5. (S/NF) Tanasescu continued that in the medina recently radios in all of the shops were tuned to the new Koranic station, Zeitouna. While that station broadcasts a moderate Islamic message, he suggested that there is a growing focus on religion that both reflects and encourages extremism. He also pointed to the recent judicial ruling that a Ministry of Education ban on the wearing of "sectarian" dress (e.g. headscarfs) was unconstitutional.

¶6. (S/NF) Tanasescu also complained about the recent wave of international conferences in Tunisia, including those on terrorism and climate change. While the GOT played the conferences up (and the President and Prime Minister opened three of them), these events were in fact of minor significance and poorly organized. Tanasescu suggested they had no point other than to promote Tunisia. He added that one conference, organized by the ruling RCD party was particularly bad. That conference, he said, had the sole goal of promoting the message that "Tunisia is perfect" and Ben Ali needs to be in charge.

Ben Ali: Not Looking Good

¶7. (S/NF) Tanasescu also opined that President Ben Ali is not in good health and had looked "particularly weak" at the October 25 presentation of credentials by new Ambassadors. At that event, Ben Ali had difficulty standing without leaning on a podium. Ambassador noted that Ben Ali had looked fine at two events in early November, including a November 7 celebration and the opening of the terrorism conference. Tanasescu acknowledged that the president looked better at those meetings.

No Good Answers

¶8. (S/NF) Ambassador asked if Tanasescu had recommendations on addressing the perceived problems in Tunisia. Tanasescu said the only option is to talk frankly to the Tunisians, particularly to GOT leaders. He acknowledged, however, that they are unlikely to listen to views from the outside. He admitted, too, that he had shared his view with only a handful of people and could not do so with most of the European Union representatives in Tunis. The EU, he said, leaks like a sieve with most information immediately being passed to the GOT. He cited an example of details of a conversation in a Brussels meeting being passed to the GOT. The result, he said, was problems for one EU Ambassador here.

Problems in Romania, too

¶9. (S/NF) Turning briefly to Romania, Tanasescu also expressed concern about his own country's future. He suggested that the Romanian President was taking actions that are endangering democracy. He was not optimistic that the situation would evolve positively, noting he saw some indications of a turn toward authoritarianism.

Comment

¶10. (S/NF) Tanasescu's assessment of Tunisia is, by far, the most negative we have heard from a member of the Tunisian diplomatic corps. While we do not fully subscribe to his

views, they merit consideration. Although we do not see an economic parallel (Tunisia is much better off than Romania at the end of Ceausescu,s rule), there are political similarities. There is no doubt that despite its considerable economic and social progress, Tunisia is not a healthy country. The painfully slow political progress and the ever-present "cult of personality" are major problems. The fate of Ceausescu and the collapse of his regime should be cautionary tales for Ben Ali and the GOT. End Comment.
GODEC